Appropriating Revolution: The Anatomy of Protest in Yan Lianke's *Hard Like Water*

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Abstract:
Belonging to the genre of Chinese Writing called 'Scar Literature', acclaimed Chinese novelist Yan Lianke's *Hard Like Water* stands out for its depiction of protests. This article explores how Lianke not only uses the novel as a satirical, protest narrative against the idiosyncratic, pervasive and colossal aftermath of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution launched by Mao Zedong, rife with vicious violence and chaos; but also embarks on a parallel tangent wherein he subverts the very process of revolution as singularly magnanimous, social and selfless by brilliantly juxtaposing it with the personal and the physical. This is achieved through the lead characters of Gao Aijun and Xia Hongmei, who engulf themselves in a torrid extra-marital love affair, which is inextricably woven into the ideological. The article also investigates how Lianke's clever appropriation of the prescribed diction of Cultural Revolution, supplemented by a variegated cross-referencing of literary and propaganda narratives from the history of Chinese Revolutions, threatens the certainty of the callous logic of revolutionary discourse, transforming the very "idiom into instrument."
Keywords: Protest Narrative, Appropriation, Politico-Social Satire, Hybridity, Ambivalence.

Introduction
Chinese novelist Yan Lianke's *Hard Like Water* blatantly and vehemently subscribes to the genre of writing that is quintessentially Protest Literature pitted against the deterministically egregious aftermath of the historically notorious Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China. However, it is not a linearly simple endeavor at catharsis emerging from the repercussions of the time beset with communist policies. The relevance of discourse as a cultural concept lies in its ability to fuse power with knowledge, where "those who have power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and

those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not."[1] In the light of the discourse of revolution, then, an investigation of how the novel demonstrates an unmistakably complex mesh of the variegated nuances of protest, requires pertinence. Lianke embarks on a journey to explore the intricate dynamics of the precarious overlap between protest, power, ambition, erotic love, delusion, and social responsibility within the broader premise of revolution, critiquing the apparently tenable logic of ideology that sustains it in the first place. It is these nuances that the article seeks to investigate and unravel, within the theoretical nexus of hybridity, appropriation, mimicry, and ambivalence; concepts proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, a stalwart of contemporary postcolonial studies. The article specifically explores and analyses the appropriation of language, specific to the Cultural Revolution, with the purpose of challenging its unequivocal ideological enormity. It further tackles the possibility of the lead characters fashioning an ambivalent place for enunciation of their hybrid revolutionary personas, thereby denouncing the supposed certainty and purity of the inflexible logic of the discourse of the revolution.

An Overview of the Novel

The novel opens with the protagonist, Gao Aijun, recounting the history of his "revolutionary family," waiting for his impending execution, the reason for which is undisclosed.[2] A twenty-six-year-old, married soldier deployed in the People's Liberation Army, Aijun opts to be demobilized, thereby forsaking viable opportunities for prestigious promotions in the Army, in order to pursue the revolution from his home in the Balou Mountains of the province of Henan. While he is homeward bound to Chenggang, he meets the resplendent Xia Hongmei, also married, at a deserted railway track, while the ambience reverberates with the cacophony of revolutionary songs blaring on public loudspeakers.

This encounter serves to ignite an unfettered passion within the duo, which hurls them into a torrid extra-marital affair. Much of the energy of this affair seems to draw from the absolute, unadulterated allegiance that both of

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[1] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 15.

[2] Yan Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, trans. Carlos Rojas (London: Penguin Random House, 2021), p. 3.

them harbor for Chairman Mao Zedong and his revolution, as well as the ensuing ambition to rise up to position of prominence as revolutionary ideals, disallowing anyone to treat them as if they were "merely made of mud, straw, or paper."[3] Presuming themselves to have been entrusted with the unspoken responsibility of spearheading the revolution in the village, they deduce their sexual passion to be a segue to an ostensibly unprecedented revolutionary success, to the extent of spending three years digging a underground 'tunnel of love' to allay any and every hindrance to their sexual encounters, the place where they croon revolutionary melodies and have verbal tussles involving Maoist poems and slogans, that precede bouts of animated coitus.

The progression of the story unravels a mélange of individuals and associations, dissecting the already thread-bare socio-politics of the Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution. Particularly brought under the microscope are topics such as marriage, dogma of communism, corrupting power: those things considered 'essential' to revolution. A twist of fate, coupled with their growing negligence towards maintaining the clandestine nature of their affair, lands them in prison, having been branded as counterrevolutionaries. Their attempts to salvage their entities as inseparable to revolution eventually culminates into a harsh public execution, rounding the readers back to where the novel began, wondering to which side of the revolution should Hongmei and Aijun be consigned.

The Novel as a Protest Narrative

As an author, Yan Lianke, has been consistent in using his writing as a medium to critique the Chinese Communist regime in China, which has resulted in much of his fiction having been banned in the country, and his subsequent self-confessed efforts towards self-censorship to ensure the publication of his novels in China. While some of his novels such as *Dream of Ding Village*, *The Day the Sun Died* and *Years, Months and Days* use absurdity to elaborate upon the miserable reality of a populace reeling under the communist aftermath, some others like *The Explosion Chronicles*, *Serve the People* and *Lenin's Kisses* are more direct as narratives of protest. However, no other novel of his is as conspicuous in dealing with the discursive edifice of revolution as well as the strata of the strategy of protest as *Hard Like Water*.

The novel tackles revolution from a variety of angles; Lianke not only uses the novel as a satirical, protest narrative against the idiosyncratic,

[3] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 18.

pervasive, and colossal ramifications of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution launched by Mao Zedong, rife with vicious violence and chaos; but also embarks on a parallel tangent wherein he subverts the very process of revolution as singularly magnanimous, social, and selfless. He achieves this through the lead characters of Aijun and Hongmei, who are engulfed in the turbulence of an all-consuming extra-marital love affair, which is inextricably woven into the ideology of their assessment of the revolution.

Lianke is noticeably blunt about the indiscriminate socio-cultural and economic anarchy to which the Cultural Revolution subjected the populace. Besides mentions of prices skyrocketing during the revolution being "a historical rule," the stagnant economy is brought to the fore by sights of empty factories "full of logs and rusting iron, like women who had died in childbirth," failing agrarian rural societies, and even the work-point system, having been usurped by revolutionary strategies.[4] From stuffing one's hands in one's pockets to wearing "work-fabric pants and black revolutionary shoes [being] class markers," to explicit statements by Aijun like "If I tell you to smile, you'll smile and if I tell you not to smile, then you'll have no choice but to cry," the novel presents tyranny as implicit in the public perception of, as well as participation in, revolution.[5]

The cardinal requirement of a colonial discourse to sustain itself is the uninhibited production of acquiescent subjects who imitate and reproduce its conventions, presumptions, and principles; that is, who exist via mimicking the colonizer. However, in contrast, it also engenders ambivalent subjects who indulge in mimicry that almost always bleeds into mockery. Bhabha opines that such repetition of "partial presence" (not complete in prior essence, but rather a manifestation of a partially mimicked existence), which is the basis of mimicry, expresses "those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority."[6] On the same lines, Aijun becomes a major agent of parodying revolutionary motivations and manifestations, whether they are his own or others'. He longs to burn the Cheng Brothers' manuscripts, not because they are a feudal yoke, but because he has to subject himself to three self-criticisms when he drops one of the scripts mistakenly, earning the ire of his teacher. His decision to attack and blast Cheng Temple, under the pretext of the venue being a feudal relic, actually stems from his displeasure and

[4] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 11.
[5] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, pp. 50, 51.
[6] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 112.

ensuing vendetta against Mayor Wang Zenhai, who later suffers the wrath of his cunning exposé. His decision to have wild sex with Hongmei on a bed sheeted with the Neo-Confucian books and manuscripts, as her father-in-law, Cheng Tianmin, sits in a chair, gagged and bound, forced to watch the two of them, is a vehement and childish statement of assertion of control and power, for they believe that he disclosed their affair to the Party high command, thereby ruining their otherwise extremely promising political career. He attempts to justify the ruthless, pre-meditated murders of Hongmei's husband and father-in-law as random, inevitable displays of violence, chosen by the revolution, to expand its base and protect its cause. He follows the revolutionary mandates at every step, but relentlessly misappropriates them for his benefit, mimicking as well as mocking at the acts of Chinese communism, which took advantage of the same paradigm.

The propaganda of Cultural Revolution is widely critiqued as being disproportionately concerned with the positive attributes of Chairman Mao, being treated with a fidelity and surrender that is unconditional and incontestable, to the extent of bordering on absurd. Indeed, Hongmei refuses to wash her hand after it brushes against Chairman Mao's. Such a small act as throwing away candy wrappers with revolutionary mottos printed on them is considered reactionary and merits punitive measures, while the revolutionary aphorisms are intrusively pervasive enough to make their way into the colloquial expressions of the residents. They exclaim "Fight selfishness and criticize revisionism," in the same breath as they inquire if the other person has had their lunch.[7] Besides these, suggestions like planting trees in every intersection of the county seat to "form the phrases 'Three Loyalties and Four Boundlessnesses'" display extreme loyalty.[8]

This mania is demonstrated in its worst possible practice through the penalties directed towards counterrevolutionaries, with the slightest possible pretext interpreted as reactionary. A town chief has to suffer broken legs for accidentally dropping a copy of the *Little Red Book* in his toilet, while a projector machinist is penalized for mistakenly showing an image of the state leaders upside down. In addition, any accused may be subjected to any of the following punishments: lynching, immolation, drowning, eye-gouging, and public executions. Not only do these penalties mirror the nationwide massacres that characterised China during Cultural Revolution, but through them, Lianke repeatedly questions the validity of the proposition of violence

[7] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 304.
[8] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 313.

being essential and inevitable to revolution, apropos the annihilation of all other human life and attributes, as an equally unavoidable collateral damage. The act of distributing land to the residents of a village in order to keep them from starving to death is labelled reactionary. Communist policies are blindly adhered to, and the impossibility of redemption from the sin of betraying the revolution is paramount, as is prominently demonstrated via the character of Zhao Xiuyu, who opts to die by suicide rather than be imprisoned for treason against the revolution. This is juxtaposed by Li Lin's fate, who was pounded to death by a throng of irked villagers. These deaths make Lianke's scathing sarcasm brandish brightly, as he called them "heartrending tragedies…resulting from…a lack of awareness of collectivism."[9]

Layered Protest: Appropriation of the Tenets of Revolution

Nelson defines appropriation as "a distortion, not a negation of the prior semiotic assemblage [which] when successful, maintains but shifts the former connotations to create new sign…covertly, making the process appear ordinary and natural."[10] In addition, Ashley and Plesch opine that by virtue of its associations with power, the term 'appropriation' was often ascribed a negative imputation in the course of its early popularity within cultural studies, when it opened varied possibilities for the production of cultural meanings, occurring through the appropriation of an "other."[11] Thus, appropriation may simply be considered to be the process of tacitly manipulating anything to suit one's subjective agenda, resulting in an alteration of existing connotations apropos of that which is appropriated.

Lianke uses this strategy liberally in the novel, with the opening lines having Aijun discuss "invoking the reputation of the revolution."[12] This exemplifies the founding ground for the critique of the discourse of revolution – a brewing cauldron of stagnant stereotypes, dogmatic assertions and essentialist spirit. This is a discourse that Lianke successfully usurps. He meticulously chooses the quintessential pre-requisites of revolution, which are meant to be constant across cultures, only to tear them asunder via the appropriation of the same. One such essential feature is vividly exemplified

[9] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 299.
[10] Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff (eds), *Critical Terms in Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 164.
[11] Kathleen Ashley and Veronique Plesch, 'The Cultural Processes of "Appropriation",' *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2002), p. 3.
[12] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 1.

throughout the novel by the diktats of the army, who regard the revolution as entailing a seizure of one's spirit, a consistent search for flaws, and a constant need to imprison one's thoughts. It is clearly specified that the revolution is hindered by the involvement of the physical. Cheng Guizhi reprimands her husband, Aijun, alluding to him as a hooligan when he tries to playfully caress her body in a moment of intimacy, thereby implying that all sexual acts are meant only for procreation and not for pleasure. Secretary Huan also categorically mentions a party regulation wherein the Communist Party prohibits people engaged in revolutionary activities from "opening mom-and-pop stores"; therefore, if Aijun and Hongmei decided to be a couple, they would not be stationed or working together.[13]

This particular sentiment of love, sex, and eroticism being in opposition to the political transcendentalism of the revolution is turned on its head by Lianke, who roots Aijun's and Hongmei's revolutionary fervor in the tangible and realistic manifestation of their carnal desire for each other, thereby making their sexual and revolutionary acts so inextricably intertwined and co-dependent that the demonstration of protest through the rebellion against capitalism is dexterously layered into an alternative protest against one of the primary dictums of that very revolution. This thus countermands the established logic of the revolutionary discourse, as well as subverting the necessities of the revolution as a concept.

Bill Ashcroft explains appropriation as the process of annulling a central idea corresponding to recognized, standard or proper manner of doing something, while re-delineating the practice or the concept with changed parameters in an altered setting.[14] Lianke, by means of the erotically charged love of the two lead characters, subverts the Cultural Revolution by appropriating it through the "erotics of revolutionary activism."[15] Classifying their love and romance as distinctly revolutionary, Aijun and Hongmei seem to reflect the thought process of Stephen Dedalus from James Joyce's known künstlerroman *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.[16] All of Stephen's epiphanies, which contribute to his growth as an artist, come from his sensual perceptions and his heightened sensitivity towards those insights. Towards the end, he deduces that the only way for him to fulfill his responsibility as

[13] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 310.
[14] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, p. 15.
[15] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 416.
[16] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994).

an artist towards society is to embrace his perception of national consciousness and strive towards the freedom of Ireland in the best way he can, which is inevitably through his art, in turn rooted in his sensual perceptivity. Sensuality thus becomes a medium for his artistic deliverance. Similarly, Aijun and Hongmei feel that they can realize their responsibility as revolutionaries only through a steady, constant, and reinforced intertwining of their erotic love and the revolution, as both are obsessed with the spirit of what a revolution stands for.

The appropriation of the tenets of revolution through the protagonists is one of the most pervasive strands of the novel. Their premier encounter by the rail tracks, with Aijun feeling like the "hero of a revolutionary epic" as Hongmei takes off her shirt, as if caught in a trance, and his being hypnotized by her toes painted in bright red, palpably invokes a sexual intensity despite the absence of any substantially concrete act that may qualify as coital.[17] A major part of the description of this scene comprises an array of revolutionary songs and slogans being broadcast on loudspeakers, woven into a beautiful synesthetic display of a deeper, sensual perception blooming out of the stimulus that is revolution. Here, the author talks of melodies like "the earthy smelling song 'Not even Heaven or Earth are as Vast as the Kindness of the Party', the "black-iron and while-steel song 'Carry the Revolution to the End'" and "the red-filled-with-green-fragrance song 'Please Drink a Cup of Buttermilk Tea'."[18]

They are both stuck in the banal rigmarole of their respective lack-luster, strenuous marriages, and associated parenthood. The comparison that Aijun makes between the sparrow pecking the belly of a supine sow for lice on the roadside, and his wife rinsing the wheat as their daughter lays asleep in her lap, clearly demonstrates Aijun's desire for a conspicuous unrest within himself; an upset of complacence that can spur him head-on into the revolution. Hongmei disconcerts him, and this is a major aspect of Aijun's unmitigated attraction towards her. The revolution in their sentiment thus corresponds to the sentiment of their revolution, which has found a receptor in the other. Their obsession with one another is simultaneously a cause as well as an effect of their obsession with the revolution. Their "decadent anti-revolutionary encounter" leads to the unfolding of a different revolutionary scene, because the revolution stands by everything that its revolutionaries do,

[17] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 12.
[18] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 18.

given that it is considered necessary for the revolution.[19]

While discussing the visibility of mimicry, Bhabha states that it is always "uttered inter dicta." This is a discourse lodge at the crossroads of that which is known, acknowledged and accepted, and that which is known but must stay clandestine - "a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them."[20] The adulterous affair of the lead characters eventually becomes the discourse of the hybrid version of the revolution. At many points, various facets of revolution serve as potent aphrodisiacs for their sexual encounters, and consequently a prospective probability of a sexual encounter as a mode of celebrating a revolutionary act. This propels them to pursue the revolution with more vigor. Aijun fails to accord a reason to why "the bright red melodies were able to ignite the fire in [his] veins and awaken [his] members as though rousing a sleeping lion."[21] Revolutionary allusions and morsels of gossip not only summon their innermost passions, but also percolate into something as trivial as their pillow-talk, often serving to be an inevitable element of their foreplay. Their sexual, as well as textual sprees, are initiated by, carried through, and culminated in, revolution. While it may also be interpreted as a subversive technique employed by Lianke to trivialize the magnanimity associated with the grandeur that was apparently cardinal and implicit to Cultural Revolution, or the loophole that being a part of the revolution may transform into a delusional and fallacious absolution from sundry crimes and sins, including that of murder or abject adultery or negligent parenting, it also qualifies to be a point of argument against the dogma of the essentialism of the revolution and the denial of a subjective, individual standpoint.

Intertextuality and Linguistic Appropriation

It is highly tenable that language, in all its forms of expression, is a powerful cultural tool. Ashley and Plesch state that James C. Scott has designated certain "hidden transcripts" and methods like concealment and disguise by which the allegedly powerless combat domination. They explain that as the "subordinates appear to assent to the public script by which the dominant group performs its power… there may be sites and occasions (often associated with popular culture) that allow the voicing or enacting of dissent

[19] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 23.
[20] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 89.
[21] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 113.

without producing retribution."[22] Linguistic appropriation hence becomes imperative as a mechanism of resistance, and within the premise of the novel, this is brought about by a two-pronged strategy.

To state that the novel displays magnificent intertextuality would be an understatement. Not only does the text cross-reference and allude to a plethora of Chinese and Soviet literary and propaganda narratives precise to their respective revolutions, but Lianke also brilliantly uses the language of the novel to appropriate the prescribed diction of Cultural Revolution, as well as popular Chinese folk narratives, to satirize and threaten the certainty of the callous logic of revolutionary discourse, transforming, as Thomas Chen comments, the very "idiom into instrument…realistically capturing the logorrhea and hypocrisy of the times."[23]

The very title of the novel, which according to the translator's note is inspired from the paradoxical notion of formless, shapeless water being able to subsume the hardest possible objects (expounded in *Dao De Jing*, the classic Chinese text), is a clever play on Aijun's 'hardness' – the fact that he carries within himself the strength to sweep the village of Henan with the revolutionary current of his oratory based in a sound knowledge of Maoist doctrines despite being an erstwhile humble peasant-soldier. He also displays the tumescence of a phallus, which can only be sustained through manifestations of revolutionary ardour, serves to depict Aijun's and Hongmei's dedication towards the cause of the revolution.

In a review, Chen discusses the novel as depicting the Cultural Revolution as a campaign propelled, as well as executed, by words.[24] The power of words is precisely what aids Aijun in bringing the revolution to his village of Chenggang. The novel constantly alludes to the variegated genre of narratives particular to the period of Cultural Revolution – complete versions of Mao Zedong's poems, Marxist mottos, the songs and slogans of the People's Republic of China, and quotes from the model operas.[25] These

[22] Ashley and Plesch, "The Cultural Processes of "Appropriation"," p. 5.
[23] Thomas Chen, 'Idiom as Instrument: On Yan Lianke's *Hard Like Water*', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 21 August (2021). At https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/idiom-as-instrument-on-yan-liankes-hard-like-water/. Accessed 3/03/2022.
[24] Chen, 'Idiom as Instrument'.
[25] Model or revolutionary operas shows specifically fashioned and handpicked to promote the Communist Party ideals during the Cultural Revolution of China. They belong to the genre of Peking or Beijing Operas. For more information, see Joe He, *A Historical Study On the "Eight Revolutionary Model Operas" in China's Great Cultural Revolution* (Master of Arts Thesis, University of Nevada, 1991).

references have driven various Chinese critics to call the book a veritable glossary and gallery of revolutionary language. These allusions often finely distort not just the language but also the intended meaning of the original text, while seamlessly bleeding into the novel itself. A number of prominent Peking or Beijing Operas, the eighteen model plays, are knitted into Aijun's first-person narrative of his life as a revolutionary. While excerpts from *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* are used to comment upon Aijun's own attempt to sneak into enemy territory and employed as a veritable spark to kindle their lust for each other, *The Red Lantern*'s protagonist, Li Yuhe, is an entity with whom Aijun identifies, to the extent of his own execution being a re-imagined version of Yuhe's while his attempt to bomb the Cheng Temple is expressed as a modified version of the lines from *The Battle on the Plains*.

For someone unfamiliar with the nuances of Chinese Literature, many of these allusions, especially the ones not italicized in the novel, tend pass by unnoticed, but certain conspicuously prominent stock phrases serve to enhance the satirical quotient when they are appropriated by the author. An example of such subversive engagement is seen when "the only thing the world fears is the [Communist] Party's conscientiousness" is inverted to state that "the only thing the [Communist] party fears is conscientiousness."[26] In the course of the novel, Lianke appropriates, tweaks and sculpts a plentitude of Maoist axioms, slogans and communist edicts to present the readers with what might be said to qualify to be a ludicrous take on an idiot's guide to revolution. This ranges from the transparently satiric, such as "all counter-revolutionaries attempt to use mass murder as a means to extinguishing revolution," to the more subtle, like "for revolutionaries, revolution is the source and engine of all miracles."[27]

The novel also draws from fables from folklore and mythology, some of which undergo a double appropriation. The first is at the hands of Chairman Mao, who used them to embolden the efforts against imperialism under the banner of Cultural Revolution; while the second is Gao Aijun's tactics to use the same as validations for his own acts, which he feels are central to the success of the revolution. The tale of "The Foolish Old Man Who Removes the Mountains", which was a part of Mao's concluding speech at the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in 1945, glorifies virtues of perseverance and strong will. This is cited

[26] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 420.
[27] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, pp. 58, 110.

by Gao to rationalize his massive task of digging a tunnel from his house to Hongmei's, thereby rounding up the magnanimity of the virtues within the trifling context of justifying an illicit relationship. Similarly, following the abysmal failure of his first attempt at revolution, while he is waiting for Hongmei by the Thirteen Li river he expresses the extent of his disappointment by an oblique mention of the Chinese dissident and deceased Nobel laureate, Liu Xiabo (who was not allowed to any representation to collect his award). In the same vein, he invokes the name of a mythological deity called Wu Gang, famously known as the Chinese Sisyphus, comparing his endless wait for Hongmei with Wu Gang's perennial penalty of having to chop down an Osmanthus tree that would keep growing back. Chen is quick to point out how Aijun uses direct quotes from Mao's telegram to the Labor Party of Albania in 1966 while in throes of unbridled passion with Hongmei, and shortly afterwards, uses bits from Mao's 1937 essay "On Contradiction" to condone the use of violence to murder Hongmei's husband in cold blood to keep his affair clandestine, and his political slate clean.[28] Given that Aijun is quintessentially a revolutionary fanatic, such conceits not only humorously strip the reified edifice of revolution of the projected grandeur by replacing the national with the local, and the public with the personal, but they also serve to be cautionary tales against revolution becoming an exonerating privilege.

'The Tunnel of Love' as the Third Space: Hybrid Revolutionaries

> And what is a revolutionary friendship? A revolutionary friendship is precisely the conjugal love that Hongmei and I shared…from this friendship, we drew the power to struggle, to discuss revolutionary countermeasures, and to plan revolutionary action.[29]

As a concept, discourse comprises a systematic arrangement that the dominant groups in society employ to establish a supposed ground of truth by means of imposition of precise variants of knowledge, values and disciplines upon the dominated groups. Thus, discourse as a socio-cultural device constitutes reality just as much for the objects that it ostensibly represents, as it does for the subjects who conjure it in the first place.[30] Bhabha's theory of hybridity challenges the originality and purity of cultures, thereby stating that all colonial discourse is inherently ambivalent and thus

[28] Chen, 'Idiom as Instrument'.
[29] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 87.
[30] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, p. 37.

all cultural identity is hybrid.

Within the projected discourse of the Cultural Revolution, replete with claims of its unilateral purity of objectives and aims, one may view the characters of Aijun and Hongmei as manifestations of the revolutionary hybridity, wherein the supposed revolutionary and the counter-revolutionary paradigms merge to create another dimension of protest. That the protagonist is flawed, even as an anti-hero, and stays absolutely unrepentant to the end, rids this particular hybrid entity of any accusations of softening imbalances. While Aijun and Hongmei seem to mimic the revolutionary stance in all its projected Maoist glory through their devotion to the revolution, their revolutionary fanaticism, coupled with their inability to tear it away from corporal pleasure, makes this mimicry transmute into what Ashcroft terms as mockery that appears to parody whatever it mimics.[31] Bhabha's quintessential "ruse of recognition," thereby locates doubts in the certainty of the ideological armor that the revolution ubiquitously dons, that is steadily rent asunder by their what is simultaneously "resemblance and menace," with revolution becoming a subjective justification for validating the correctitude of their stance as adulterers.[32]

The 550 meter long 'tunnel of love' that Aijun digs from his house to Hongmei's to facilitate their covert sexual encounters is also a treasure trove of revolutionary references. A "double happiness character connoting matrimonial bliss" is posted over the bed, which in turn is also crafted from mud and limestone.[33] The assiduousness of Hongmei's attempt is vivid in the lines that follow:

> On one of the room's other walls, she posited large portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Zedong; on the second, she posted portraits of Li Yuhe [from *The Red* Lantern],… Ke Xiang [from *Mountain Azalea*]… and Yang Weicai [from *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*], while on the third, she posted classic quotations and slogans such as… FIGHT SELFISHNESS, REPUDIATE REVISIONISM….Furthermore, she had carefully laminated the paper on which these portraits and slogans were printed, demonstrating the loyal meticulousness with which she approached revolution and love in this damp environment.[34]

Thus, the burrow, which comprises their nuptial chamber and bed, might

[31] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, p. 125.
[32] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 115, 86.
[33] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 234.
[34] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 234.

literally be considered to be the "Third Space of enunciation…[where]…the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the [dominant] narrative" - a space where Hongmei's screams "bright and sharp, fluttering in the tunnel like a strip of red silk" can freely flow without fear of public persecution.[35] It becomes an area that permits the enjambment of the ostensibly opposing paradigms of physical and transcendental, exemplifying the ambivalence that disrupts as well as urges. It decries positions of certitude with respect to the polarities, and eventually reifies into the hybrid identity of a hitherto unprecedented revolutionary persona, that affirms to being neither original not identical to that which is considered original, becoming what Bhabha refers to as "almost the same but not quite."[36] While the damp, underground tunnel, equipped with air holes and loudspeakers, becomes the ideal *mise-en-scène* for this double identity to foster and grow in its own flux, their coital bed becomes the site of their non-conforming standpoint, where their love-making becomes a vehement demonstration of their resistance, by nullifying the customary homogeneity and immutability of the revolutionary discourse and constructing their nouvelle, subjective meanings, thwarting the stereotypes that characterize revolution, by appropriating the latter.

This appropriation is demonstrated in a variety of ways. The broadcast of newest directives and speeches by the leaders, the blaring of revolutionary music, songs or slogans over the loudspeakers "fill the tunnel with bright red music and an atmosphere of deep excitement."[37] This invariably climaxes with the duo engaging in prolonged, heated coitus, ending with them exclaiming, "…the revolution is certainly worth it, and even death would be worth it."[38] While this is a poignant overshadowing of their looming execution later in the novel, it is also an emphatic assertion of bringing in a heterogeneous perspective to tune the reins of the revolution. They believe that the erotically charged environment led them to develop their "memories, eloquence, knowledge of theory and class consciousness", thereby becoming a "productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibility" of understanding.[39]

The consistent verbal battles wherein they use "semi-divine as well as semi obscene language to pursue a revolutionary poetical battle of words

[35] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 37; Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 220.
[36] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 86.
[37] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 235.
[38] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 236.
[39] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 239; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 32.

revolving around male or female genitalia" lead to vulgar, banal, trifles of quotidian penalties for the loser, mostly sexual, as they try to spin revolutionary yarns around randomly picked trivial objects like shovels and hair.[40] These word games can be interpreted as the author's strategy to, yet again, downplay the quintessential ideological munificence that imbues the revolution. As they heavily quote and appropriate excerpts from narratives by the five Masters – Lenin, Marx, Engels, Stalin and Mao Zedong – as well as philosophers like Lu Xun, it is clear that the tunnel serves as a space to overcome the exoticism plaguing the revolutionary spirit. It becomes a possibility of the articulation of protest where the unconditional compliance that the discourse of revolution seeks to reproduce by a strict, absolute adherence to its formulaic patterns and diktats, is disrupted while its authority is still mostly subscribed to, even through appropriation. The author's satire merely adds to the texture of the resistance that is concretized in this space through the verbal and erotic exchanges that take place between Aijun and Hongmei. This is exemplified by their views, such as "when revolutionaries use violence for the sake of revolution, it is a form of political humanism."[41] This drives them to infer that there seemed to be some connection between Stalin and violence, a possible and subtle reference to the Great Purge of 1934, a conspicuous episode of Soviet history.

Conclusion

A Pandora's Box of scathing, poignant, direct as well as subtle political, literary and cultural allusions, *Hard Like Water* uses the concept and process of 'protest' to offer a dark, sometimes humorous and often petrifying commentary on the probable pitfalls of the practice and discourse of revolutionary ideological patterns, challenging their truth, validity, logic and authority. Mirroring the 'tunnel of love', then, the novel in itself gradually metamorphoses into a space that blurs delimiting boundaries by increasingly becoming what Bhabha calls "interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative", as it calls into question the determinism of established identities as well as the numerous stereotypical fixations pervading not just the discourse of Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, but also that of revolution in general.[42]

[40] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 240.
[41] Lianke, *Hard Like Water*, p. 250.
[42] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 36.